New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1950

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NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
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NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
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"Come Back, Little Sheba"

The New York Times

February 16, 1950

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

At last the Theatre Guild has got round to doing an original play. William Inge's "Come Back, Little Sheba," which was acted at the Booth last evening, is straightforward and unhackneyed and, in its best moments, terrifyingly true. Having been a drama critic, Mr. Inge naturally knows more about more things than most people, including the sort of material worth writing about in the theatre.

In his second professionally produced drama he has poked into the agony of an alcoholic who is trying to escape the disaster of an intolerable life. Among the other useful things Mr. Inge knows is how to write two parts that Shirley Booth and Sidney Blackmer can act, with a simple honesty that is pitiless and overwhelming.

* * *

"Come Back, Little Sheba," is a small play. During the first half of the evening Mr. Inge has kept it so slight that it verges on the monotonous. He is describing the dreary home life of a Middle Western chiropractor who is well along in a cure for alcoholism. Doc, which is the character's only name, lives in a messy house run by his good-natured but slovenly wife, who is sentimental, lazy and common.

Apparently Mr. Inge wants you to believe that Doc has been compensating himself through alcohol for marrying beneath his station. Since Doc is no great shakes himself, this column will reserve judgment on Mr. Inge's diagnosis pending further evidence of Doc's superiority.

* * *

Whatever the truth may be about the causes which Mr. Inge sketches very lightly and tentatively in the first act, the consequences are wild and frightening in the second act when Mr. Inge gets to work with his coat off. For the irritations and frustrations of a squalid home and tragic memories are more than Doc can stand. He goes off the deep end and wrecks all that is left. In a last forgiving scene Doc and his wife cling desperately together, afraid of the horrible things they know. Doc is not cured. But his wife and he understand each other and love each other. They can face the future—whatever the future turns out to be.

* * *

Under the direction of Daniel Mann, the Theatre Guild and its handservants have arranged a candid production and a splendid performance. Howard Bay has designed functional scenery that catches the dreariness as well as the hominess of an old house in a run-down neighborhood. And Lucille Little has provided costumes that portray the hopelessness of the old people and the shining self-confidence of some young people who run in and out without ever realizing the horrors that surround them.

The small parts are neatly played—Daniel Reed as postman, who knows how to listen to nonsense graciously; John Randolph as an athletic milkman; Olga Fabian as a warmhearted neighbor; Lonny Chapman and Robert Cunningham as suitors for a college girl who rooms in Doc's house; Wilson Brooks and Paul Krauss as cardholders in good standing with Alcoholics Anonymous. As the blonde and self-centered college girl Joan Lorring gives a genuine and attractive performance.

But "Come Back, Little Sheba" is overweighted by the characters of Doc and his wife. Again Miss Booth is superb. She has the shuffle, the maddening garrulity and the rasping voice of the slattern, but withal she imparts to the role the warmth, generosity and valor of a loyal and affectionate woman. Mr. Blackmer gets through Doc's weak good-nature painlessly in the first act. In the second act he plays the scene of disaster like a thunderbolt, leaving the Theatre Guild subscribers pretty well stunned.

Mr. Inge's play is unnecessarily bare in view of the lives he is tampering with. The first act is hardly more than an outline. There must be more to the nightmare of Doc and his wife than Mr. Inge has reported. But when he is ready to plunge into the anguish in the second act, he writes with a kind of relentless frankness and compassion that are deeply affecting. Miss Booth and Mr. Blackmer know what he means and say it with extraordinary resourcefulness and veracity.

"COME BACK, LITTLE SHEBA"

Play by William Inge; staged by Daniel Mann; setting by Howard Bay; costumes by Lucille Little; production under the supervision of Lawrence Langner and Theresa Helburn; associate producer, Phyllis Anderson; presented by the Theatre Guild at the Booth Theatre, February 15, 1950. The cast:

Doc.....Sidney Blackmer
Marie.....Joan Lorring
Lola.....Shirley Booth
Turk.....Lonny Chapman
Postman.....Daniel Reed
Mrs. Coffman.....Olga Fabian
Milkman.....John Randolph
Messenger....Arnold Schulman
Bruce.....Robert Cunningham
Ed Anderson....Wilson Brooks
Elmo Huston.....Paul Krauss

Synopsis: An old house in a run-down neighborhood of a Mid-Western city. Act I. Scene 1. Morning in late spring. Scene 2. The same evening, after supper. Act II. Scene 1. The following morning. Scene 2. Late afternoon the same day. Scene 3. 5:30 the next morning. Scene 4. Morning, a week later.

DAILY NEWS

February 16, 1950

Mr. Blackmer and Miss Booth Earn Big Cheers in Moody 'Little Sheba'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The Theatre Guild's newest offering, William Inge's "Come Back, Little Sheba," is a strange drama. As I left its premiere at the Booth Theatre last evening I was not certain—and still am not certain—whether it was mixed up or whether both of us were. The nearest I can come to assaying its worth is to state that it is part Chekhov, part Arthur Miller and part the divine gospel of Alcoholics Anonymous, and that another title for it might be "Death of a Poodle."

One thing I am sure of: It is splendidly played by Sidney Blackmer and Shirley Booth (for whom the Booth Theatre is hereby officially renamed). The first audience was intensely absorbed during the two comparatively short acts, and at the end it voiced many cheers. Here, now, is my own cheer for Miss Booth and Mr. Blackmer as performers. Here, too, is a warm handclasp for author Inge, a newcomer to the local drama who has an admirably sensitive instinct for mood.

One of these days Mr. Inge, who has compassion for human beings, should write a very fine play. Maybe he has already written it in "Come Back, Little Sheba," and my own reaction to it will be an unimportant one in the face of overwhelming popular approval. But to me, "Sheba" is a work of great promise, excellently produced and acted, which falls a little short of being a play. It sets a mood and it has one fine, exciting moment—but it fails to gain my loyalty to any one character.

Little to Live For.

"Sheba" is a Missouri "Cherry Orchard." Miss Booth and Mr. Blackmer have been married 20 years, have lived in a midwestern town and are completely frustrated. The baby they had long ago died, and recently their dog, Sheba, has vanished. Miss Booth was once a pretty and vivacious girl, but now she is sloppy and lazy. Mr. Blackmer was going to be a doctor, but when he got married he had to quit college and became a chiropractor.

The husband is worse off than the wife, for she at least can find temporary satisfactions in a piece of cake or some lively music on the radio, while he is not only embittered but also a reformed drunk. Under the guidance of the strong-will men from AA, he hasn't touched liquor for nearly a year.

Then things blow up. The girl roomer whom he has come to regard as his lost daughter is a sweet little thing—but loose. In a surge of bitterness about people in general and the girl in particular, the husband grabs a bottle, goes on a bender, tries to eliminate his stupid wife with a hatchet and is led off to the city's drunk ward by two stalwarts of the AA. When he comes home sober he is back in the same old groove—all he and his wife have in this world are each other, since the dog Sheba got lost, and they aren't so much.

One Big Scene.

The scene in which Mr. Blackmer gets stewed and goes after Miss Booth with the wood chopper is a dramatic firecracker exploding in a calm of dull, peasant American life. It is wonderfully well played—and wonderfully well written. But the play does not grab hold of my heart and drag it along the hard, rough ground as does "Death of a Salesman."

There are good supporting performances by Joan Lorring, Lonny Chapman and others. Daniel Mann's direction is persistently Chekhovian and effective within its self-imposed limits of pace and emotion, and there is an appropriate setting by Howard Bay. Mr. Inge's play is interesting enough to make me want to see the next one he does, and I applaud the Theatre Guild for finding him and puting his first drama on the stage under the best of circumstances.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

February 16, 1950

Shirley Booth Soars In 'Little Sheba'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

That the dullest of fronts may hide cataclysmic drama is the idea explored in remarkable fashion in "Come Back, Little Sheba," the oddly named new attraction of the Theater Guild.

The play is told in a powdery style which seems to insist that what happens is ordinary and hardly worth mentioning. From the point of view of a neighbor down the block, what goes on in Lola and Doc's house is eminently unimportant.

But if you lived next door you would care. And from the audience, because of sensitive, disciplined direction and remarkable acting, these events take on real impact.

Spiced With Laughs.

With a lot of laughs on its face, it is a melancholy little story at heart. Lola and Doc are strangely polite for a couple married as long as they have been. They both seem resigned to his mediocre practice and her slovenly house.

Gradually the situation clears as Lola reminisces, stupidly worrying over the past because she has no present. Doc had to marry her, 20 years ago, and when he could not finish his pre-med course, he began to drink. Her baby died. Doc's tooth-grinding air comes from his stern participation in Alcoholics Anonymous.

Little Sheba was a white puppy Lola loved, who was too cute to ever grow up, but who disappeared. Always she hopes it will come back, and childishly keeps calling it, like her youth.

The Doc Slips.

Their roomer is a fresh, pretty college girl, rich in the romance that turned sour on them. When Doc finds her sleeping with one fellow, engaged to another, all his bitterness about his own life comes to the surface. He makes what in A. A. is called a slip.

Largely because the atmosphere has been so humdrum and life so dusty, the blow-off, when it comes, is like an emotional tidal wave. Naturally enough Doc blames his failure on Lola, while in his inflamed alcoholic wage. What happens and how it is resolved is both startling and quite within the shape and intent of the play.

Shirley Booth soars histrionically in a role that could dismay most actresses. Lola is stupid and lazy. She has never progrossed mentally beyond the delights of the dances and parties she knew at 19. She is not unkind, and she has no vanity. She is just one of those bubbles of humanity that no one wants to hurt unless she bores him too much.

No Tricks, No Angles.

Meticulously built up with apt readings, half gestures and intelligent constancy, the character becomes so real in Miss Booth's playing that it seems more an acquaintance than an artistic creation. She portrays a pure simpleton, without resort to tricks, guile or angles. To know what a feat that is, you will have to see it.

Sidney Blackmer does what is certainly his best job in recent years as the suppressed and endlessly patient Doc who breaks his traces.

The character he is playing is a dull man, in the sense that any entire failure is liable to be dull. Blackmer protrays him with compelling suspensefulness, so that without ever saying so, he emanates the possibility of an explosion.

When it comes, it is sordid and agonizing. Once his crazy passions are let loose, Doc comes within a split second of being a front-page newspaper story. Here, as in the quieter passages, Blackmer is splendid.

A Delicate Structure.

Joan Lorring has a good-natured flip quality as the boarder which contrasts with her sensitive and fearsome moments.

William Inge's play is a delicate, unusual structure which makes no compromises toward flamboyant artifice. It is a rarely honest piece of theater writing which could survive only if it received the kind of acting it here gets, and the vastly appreciative direction which Daniel Mann has given it, knowing it is tenuous and in need of creative suspense. It is exciting only when it chooses to be, but it is always enticing.

Journal American

February 16, 1950

An Acting Triumph For Booth, Blackmer

By ROBERT GARLAND

There is no keener pleasure in the theatre than the pleasure of watching excellent actors, acting. They, in the flesh, are what separates the theatre that really is the theatre from the theatre that merely is a shadow you can hear or a voice you can see.

The excellent actors I have in mind are Shirley Booth and Sidney Blackmer. They are acting in a play by William Inge called "Come Back, Little Sheba." After a Summer tryout at Westport, it is The Theatre Guild's fourth presentation this season.

Under the direction of Daniel Mann, in a setting by Howard Bay, with the acting of Miss Booth and Mr. Blackmer, Mr. Inge's play—a reformed drama, screen and music critic from Missouri, his "Farther Off From Heaven" was done in Dallas—is notable.

Granting that, between them, Shirley Booth and Sidney Blackmer make "Come Back, Little Sheba" sound and look better than it might sound and look without them, William Inge has provided them with a vehicle in which to ride their talents.

It is only when the playwright turns away from Doc and Lola, his pivotal married couple, and turns to Marie, Turk and Bruce, his secondary triangle, that his play gets out of focus and out of hand. Then Miss Booth and Mr. Blackmer take over . . .

Doc Is Sweet

Few things are duller than an alcoholic. One of them is a reformed alcoholic. But this is not too true in the case of Doc, unheroic hero of William Inge's first play to reach Broadway. Doc is a sweet guy when you meet him, if not brilliant.

Something of a brooder, he broods from kitchen to living-room in his house in a run-down neighborhood of a mid-western American city. When not brooding about the married life that is not his, he broods about the sweet Marie who is not his, either.

Marie is a darling double-crosser who, sotto voce, is not as far from real life as your better self supposes. With a guy named Bruce waiting for her in Cincinnati, she waits for another guy named Turk who lives just around the corner.

Marie is also the darling double-crosser of Doc's extra-marital eye. A comfort, she, when Lola slops around her sloppy house and talks sloppily and forever to him. So, between them and his leanings toward liquor, he falls off the wagon, picks up a hatchet—

Well, this hatchet picking-up provides the evening with its great excitement. Doc goes berserk. So berserk goes he that, when a couple of tough AAs arrive, they carry him off to the hospital for alcoholics which is also an asylum for the insane . . .

But Lola waits and waits and welcomes his return.

Difficult Roles

As Lola, Shirley Booth is required to make much out of a long and, owing to its nature, monotonous role. She not only makes the most of it. She makes more of it than is there. Hers is a fine example of how to drive a man to drink with kindness.

As Doc, Sidney Blackmer's assignment is even more difficult. He is required to be subdued all evening. Always on the verge of an explosion, he is not allowed to blow his top until late in the play's unfolding. When he blows it, it blows superbly.

This late-in-the-play scene between Miss Booth and Mr. Blackmer is the scene I have in mind when I write of excellent actors, acting. This late-in-the-play scene is team-work such as I have not seen herebouts in many a Broadway hour of playgoing.

The others do what the playwright, the director and their good commonsense demands. Joan Lorring is an easy-on-the-eye Marie, the darling double-crosser with her eye on Turk and Bruce and the Doc's odd eye on her. She is pretty and implausible.

There are two big health-and-strength men. One is Turk, played out of the side of his mouth by Lonny Chapman. The other is a Milkman, played bar-belligerently by John Randolph. But "Come Back, Little Sheba" belongs to Shirley Booth and Sidney Blackmer . . .

Theirs were the cheers and curtain calls last evening.